

Trinity Sunday, June 11, 2006
Sermon delivered by William Flanders

“The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Today is traditionally celebrated as Trinity Sunday. A forbidding challenge to any preacher - which is undoubtedly the reason Susan left town. I will not try to unravel the mysteries of this ancient theological construct. But I will try to illustrate how spirit, big S and little s, works on us, within us, and among us, in life-giving ways. And, in three short stories, I will work backwards: Holy Spirit, then Son, then, finally, Father-Mother Creator.

Seventeen years ago the French grand-niece of my first wife Claire, came from Grenoble to spend part of the summer here with our family. She was about sixteen and arrived in Washington on July 14th, 1989 - the 200th anniversary of the original Bastille Day. Her name was - is - Natacha, and we all went that evening to a special musical celebration at Wolf Trap. For the occasion I had brought along a bottle of champagne. When I opened it I remember pausing. Natacha barely spoke any English and I didn't know if her parents let her drink wine as is often the custom in France. So I spoke slowly and asked her: “Is it all right for you to have some champagne?” I wasn't sure she understood, but I remember that she smiled, looked at me and said, “Why not?!”

Natacha, we would all learn, was someone who had spirit. At the end of her stay she told us: “My parents want me to study chemistry and get a degree, but I wish to become an airline pilot.” We were a family mostly engaged in artistic pursuits, and this desire soared way ahead of us. As it turned out, Natacha returned to France, made a strong attempt at a flying career, but finally didn't qualify. So she followed the lead of her teacher parents and pursued chemistry, all the way through to a doctorate! Along the way she married, and gave birth to two lively boys.

I saw Natacha again three years ago. I was struck by how little animation she had. She looked tired, and not particularly happy. Where was the spirit of the girl we'd known fourteen years before? If spirit is really like the wind, then it seemed as if her spirit had blown away. Since then I have heard that there maybe were some marriage difficulties. Her situation felt depressing. It's easy to lose contact with someone in that state, and I did. Until a month ago when, out of the blue, an email came to all the members of our family here - the first email or letter or card any of us had received from Natacha in many years.

She was loyally teaching chemistry and physics, she said, but her passion now was photography and music. She spoke of Claire, whose success in photography, and whose personal attention, had greatly influenced her. And she spoke of a renewed interest in musical performance, in particular with the clarinet that she'd played in earlier years. In fact, she was combining photography and music through being invited to extensively photograph a local orchestra. Not only that, but she now had her own professional website, and urged us all to view it.

Out of nowhere - or so it seemed to me - the spirit was back. The wind had turned and blown back the spirit of the girl who'd once looked at life and said: “Why not?!”

The Spirit, like the wind, may be mysterious and unpredictable. But spirit as the influence of one person on another, whether for good or evil, is one thing we all know something about. Even here, though, the influence of spirit is strange and surprising. Let me offer an example with which I was involved and can in no way forget.

Three years ago a memorial service was held for my wife Claire. We wanted to give an opportunity to anyone there, if so moved, to speak, beginning with members of the immediate family. Now our family is, to say the least, emotional - no one more than myself who is known to weep at Mondavi wine commercials. We weren't sure which of our four grown children would actually speak, and we all were sure that I would not. But, starting with the oldest, all four did speak - without a text - with their characteristic individuality and with true strength. I listened to them, astonished and moved and proud. And when the family had given their words, I pulled myself to my feet and walked to the pulpit from which they had spoken. I addressed the congregation squarely and, off the top of my head so to speak, I essentially said this: What happens when a leader dies? What becomes of his or her spirit? Does it just disappear, or linger on in memories for a while and then fade away. I don't think so. The evidence, I believe, is in our children who have, each one, exemplified here that spirit, and have incorporated it into their own spirit.

I'm sure I said more, and perhaps it was even important, but my conviction of the effect of spirit on spirit is what I remember. I believe this is what the disciples experienced after the death of Jesus. And it was their actual experience that is the most compelling witness to what is referred to as Resurrection. Whether it be described in the gospels as having visions of Jesus, or recognizing his beloved presence in the sharing of a meal, or, in Acts, as being caught up in the ecstasy of a mighty wind and tongues of fire; at the heart of it all is the experience of receiving and responding to the spirit of another - big S or little s.

There is a third way of thinking of - and experiencing - spirit. Perhaps it is the most pervasive, and yet not ours to command but only to hope for. It is the experience of being in a loving relationship. Sure that includes puppy love, falling in love, and all the trappings of romantic love and of a lifetime of mutual devotion. But what if there is no partner? What if one is alone with one's feelings, with one's regrets and fears - and at times, of course, we all are, partner or not. Can there still be love - a love that is deeper than the abyss we feel?

You may have heard Susan speak of a writer-clergyman she has long admired, Frederick Buechner. I have been reading a book of Buechner's sermons, and in one he tells of an experience he had when he thought his daughter was near death:

"When the worst finally happens," he writes, "a kind of peace comes. I had passed beyond grief, beyond terror, all but beyond hope, and it was there, in that wilderness, that for the first time in my life I caught sight of something of what it must be like to love God truly. It was only a glimpse, but it was like stumbling on fresh water in the desert, like remembering something so huge and extraordinary that my memory had been unable to contain it." Buechner goes on to say, "I loved [God] because there was nothing else left.

I loved him - [her] - because [God] seemed to have made himself as helpless in his might as I was in my helplessness."

To love God under such circumstances is to love life under all of life's circumstances. We speak of God as Creator, and we think, perhaps, of this earth and all it contains, and even of interstellar space and all we're learning that contains. For me God is not so much the architect that conceives and builds it all, but the eternal spirit that holds it all together through a power part of which we recognize - as love. I believe this cohesive spirit is inherent - at least potentially - in all existing beings, maybe even in all matter. Trinity Sunday: I know some will wonder what has become of Father, Son and Holy Ghost? I trust that nothing irredeemable has befallen them. I have just used other terms in an attempt to convey what I believe the work of the Trinity has always been, and continues to be, for us all. The work of spirit on spirit - big S or little s. Amen.